A C.I.A. Cable Sought to Discredit Critics of the Warren Commission

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The Central Intelligence Agency has often argued that its worldwide propaganda efforts are intended only to alter the climate of public opinion in other countries and that any "fallout" reaching the eyes and ears of Americans is both unavoidable and unintentional.

But a C.I.A. document, recently declassified under the Freedom of Information Act, provides a detailed account of at least one instance in which the agency mustered its propaganda machinery to support an issue of far more concern to Americans, and to the C.I.A. itself, than to citizens of other countries.

This was the conclusion of the Warren Commission that Lee Harvey Oswald alone was responsible for the assassination of President Kennedy.

In a cable sent to some of its overseas stations and bases on April 1, 1967, C.I.A. headquarters began by recalling that "from the day of President Kennedy's assassination on, there has been speculation about the responsibility for his murder."

Such speculation, the cable said, was "stemmed for a time" by the release of the Warren Commission's report in early 1964. But, the cable noted: "Various writers have now had time to scan the Commission's published report and documents for new pretexts for questioning, and there has been a new wave of books and articles criticizing the Commission's findings."

"This trend of opinion is a matter of concern to the U.S. Government, including our organization," the C.I.A. said, adding that the agency was "directly involved" in the matter because "among other facts, we contributed information to the investigation."

"Conspiracy theories," the cable went on, "have frequently thrown suspicion on our organization, for example by falsely alleging that Lee Harvey Oswald worked for us. The aim of this dispatch is to provide material for countering and discrediting the claims of the conspiracy theorists, so as to inhibit circulation of such claims in other countries."

The C.I.A. was careful to caution its stations overseas not to initiate a discussion "of the assassination question" where such a discussion was "not already taking place." But where such discussions were under way, C.I.A. officers abroad were directed to "discuss the publicity problem with liaison and friendly elite contacts, especially politicians and editors," and to "employ propaganda assets to answer and refute the attacks of the critics."

"Book reviews and feature articles," the cable said, "are particularly appropriate for this purpose."

Among the arguments that the agency suggested were that the Warren Commission had conducted "as thorough an investigation as humanly possible, that the charges of the critics are without serious foundation, and that further speculative discussion only plays into the hands of the opposition."

"Point out also," the cable directed, "that parts of the conspiracy talk appear to be deliberately generated by Communist propagandists."

Two of the strongest critics of the Warren Commission, Edward Jay Epstein and Mark Lane, were singled out for attack. "Although Mark Lane's book is much less convincing than Epstein's and comes off badly where contested by knowledgeable critics," the cable said, in a reference to Mr. Lane's book, 'Rush to Judgment,' it is also much more difficult to answer as a whole, as one becomes lost in a morass of unrelated details."

These critics and others, the C.I.A. said, should be depicted as "wedded to theories adopted before the evidence was in," politically or financially "interested" in disproving the commission's conclusion, "hasty or inaccurate in their research, or infatuated with their own theories."

Such critics, the cable advised, "have often been enticed by a form of intellectual pride: They light on some theory and fall in love with it; they also scoff at the commission because it did not always answer every question with a flat decision one way or the other.

"Actually, the makeup of the commission and its staff was an excellent safeguard against overcommitment to any one theory, or against the illicit transformation of probabilities into certainties."

In what was perhaps a burst of professional pride, C.I.A. headquarters asked that it also be pointed out that "Oswald would not have been any sensible person's choice for a co-conspirator—he was a 'loner,' mixed up, of questionable reliability and an unknown quantity to any professional intelligence service."